

SCARBOROUGH ELECTORATE — HOMESWEST HOUSING

Grievance

MRS L.M. HARVEY (Scarborough) [9.46 am]: My grievance today is to the Minister for Housing and Works. The most frequent complaints that I receive as the member for Scarborough, second only to those about the local government authority in my area, are to do with public housing.

At this time I would like to acknowledge that problem public housing tenants are in the minority. However, as most members would recognise, it takes only one bad neighbour to cause significant problems in a neighbourhood. Scarborough and, more specifically to this grievance, Doubleview and Innaloo have been subject to significant suburban infill. Blocks that previously contained a house, a shed and a nice big backyard are being bulldozed and the density of development is increasing. This is certainly happening with the old Homeswest stock in my area. We are finding that old fibro houses are being demolished, and then, in their place, three to five villas are built.

Doubleview and Innaloo each has a reasonable share of probably about 10 per cent of public housing. Many of the houses are remnants of earlier public housing policy. Those suburbs have probably some of the oldest dwellings in the area. A lot of them are almost uninhabitable, 1950s fibros, with three to four bedrooms and one bathroom. They really are quite dodgy, I have to say. They are not a very good reflection of what I believe is the fairly high standard that the Department of Housing is trying to put in place around the area. A lot of these dodgy old fibro houses are in clusters on streets. I do not know what the previous public housing policy was, but nobody in this day and age would believe that it is acceptable to quarantine an entire northern end of one street to comprise solely Department of Housing dwellings. It unfairly identifies the tenants of those houses as tenants of the state.

The problem that I face is that when these 1950s houses have been vacated, they are being replaced with high-density housing. To give an example of one street in Doubleview, the Department of Housing owns house numbers 128, 130, 132, 134 and 136. On the other side of the street, the Department of Housing owns house numbers 119, 121, 131 and 133. It seems that these houses are viewed singularly. As the houses are vacated, the Department of Housing appears to be looking at that block as a singular project with a view to bulldozing it and increasing the density. I understand that there are needs; a lot of people are on the public housing waiting list and we need to find homes for them. However, I suggest that in areas such as Scarborough and Doubleview—areas where the property values are rising—if two to three Homeswest housing blocks were available at one time and auctioned off together to a private developer to build higher density housing, the return to the taxpayer would be significantly increased and the concentration of Homeswest housing on particular streets would be watered down. That would also give us a much higher return on our investment when realising that asset.

The assumption always is that most of these units will be redesigned into family dwellings, but I put it to the minister that most families require a little space. When these blocks are developed to their full density potential, we end up with two-storey villas with very, very little space for children to play and for the cars that people accumulate in this day and age. Therefore, we end up with an overflow of motor vehicles and children onto the streets because they do not have yards to play in. I would be interested to know the policy on where families in state tenancies are located. What is the policy on the space that we provide for families?

Returning to the demonstration street, what was originally nine dwellings in a group of blocks no longer than seven units in length would now turn into about 27 dwellings. Therefore, along a 200-metre stretch of road, 80 per cent of those dwellings would end up as public housing. This level of concentration is not acceptable. Both public and private rental accommodation providers, as well as private owners, are concerned about the effect that concentrations of public housing will have on their local amenity. The current response from the Department of Housing is that concentrations are not looked at street by street, but are looked at over an entire suburb. I think that this kind of rationale is ridiculous. The suburb can then be divided into two levels of concentration of Homeswest housing. Clusters of public housing is simply not proper planning, and I do not believe it serves tenants well, given that a lot of the tenants in public housing have quite complex requirements. To have people clustered together when they may need a high level of support and perhaps may not work well in that intense development scenario probably is not in our best interests either.

My final point about public housing in Scarborough is that we have state housing stock in Scarborough within two blocks of the beach. We have a lot of older-style, 1970s flats that are quite disgusting. The expectation of the community is that these flats should be either renovated or flattened and rebuilt. If members looked at property values two blocks from the beach, I think they would realise that these properties should be targeted and the tenants encouraged to move on so that we can get the best return to the state on our asset. By realising the values of those properties, we could build more houses for the 20 000 people on our public housing waiting list.

MR T.R. BUSWELL (Vasse — Minister for Housing and Works) [9.53 am]: I thank the member for Scarborough for raising this issue about Homeswest densities. Before I respond to the grievance, I notice we have a number of visitors in the public gallery. I understand from the Clerk that they are years 7 to 12 students from the Pilbara and the Kimberley who are attending a role models session. On behalf of the house, I welcome them to this place. It is a little quiet this morning, but that is the way it goes sometimes.

Social housing is an important issue. Across my portfolio areas I have more correspondence with members of Parliament and constituents about this issue than any other. I am acutely aware of the impact of excessive concentrations of social housing on neighbourhoods and communities. The balance to that, I suppose, is the fact that we have 22 000 people on the public housing waiting list whom we have to accommodate. Trying to find a balance between concentration and accommodation is not without its challenges, I have to say.

I will talk specifically about some of the density issues and challenges in the Scarborough area shortly. I am aware of that having spent one wayward year of my bachelor youth as a resident in a six-dwelling development in Calais Road surviving on the produce of the Brighton Fish Supply for 12 months. Unfortunately, that is a year that I have been unable to shed from my frame ever since, but, notwithstanding that, they were good fish and chips!

We have a bit of a challenge, and I will talk broadly first and then in a little more detail. More broadly, as I said, we need to accommodate people; therefore, we have been looking at a range of options to help us deal with that. We have been focusing on broader policies to insist on better behaviour from tenants. I think that is the fundamental issue, because, ultimately, it does not matter where people are located; if their behaviour is not acceptable, they will have a negative impact on the community. Currently, some major changes are being made to the way in which Homeswest will deal with disruptive tenants, and there will be a significant crackdown on unacceptable behaviour. I have a very strong view that people have a responsibility to behave in an acceptable manner in the community in which we house them, and there will be some significant changes.

Mr E.S. Ripper: How will you deal with the interests of children?

Mr T.R. BUSWELL: That is a very good question. I have been asked: if the government evicts somebody with a family, where will they go? My answer quite simply—I know this might sound a bit harsh—is that they will find accommodation just as the family we will take off the waiting list and put into that house has done. I insist —

Ms J.M. Freeman interjected.

Mr T.R. BUSWELL: People have to be responsible for their behaviour, but we are trying to help. We have an early intervention pilot program in Cannington that is working very well. Therefore, it is not a one-way street; it is not just a big stick. But we need to change our approach and that is happening.

We need to look at using alternative social housing service providers. That is now a big focus in the community housing sector. Why? Because I think we actually get better management of tenants, especially some of the high-needs tenants, and a different approach. The general feedback I get is that the community housing sector is perhaps delivering better outcomes in managing some of those tenancies.

Mr M.P. Whitely: That is not a universal experience.

Mr T.R. BUSWELL: I understand that, but we are definitely committed to the community housing sector.

The third point is that we are trying to get a different mix of tenants to perhaps give a different dynamic. I will just touch on one of the issues that the member raised. Is it Flamethrower Street?

Mrs L.M. Harvey: Flamborough.

Mr T.R. BUSWELL: Flamborough Street—I was close! The member said there are currently two vacant lots—namely, 131 and 133 Flamborough Street in Scarborough. Those lots are being amalgamated, and we are building four aged persons units there. Therefore, we are trying to mix up the types of tenancies to try to break down the collective approach to bad behaviour that can happen. I am aware of that issue.

I will talk about the specific issue in the Scarborough area that the member raised; that is, there are some old houses. I think those old houses will be knocked over, and there will be increased urban density in Scarborough. There has to be increased urban density across Western Australia, unfortunately, and I know that will not help the member for Scarborough's constituents in that immediate area. From Homeswest's point of view, we need to ensure that the broader strategies that I outlined before help mitigate the impact of increased densities on those areas—that is, a better mix, better management and stronger crackdowns on tenants who do not behave appropriately. As houses that we term to be of "high value", which is twice the median house price, become vacant, we will sell them. I think we have identified 11 or 12 houses, and there might be 10 houses that we have

already sold. Those 10 houses yielded \$1.1 million or \$1.2 million. Currently, on land that we own, we are building both multi-unit and single-house dwellings for less than \$200 000. Therefore, we are getting a big multiplier effect, which is exactly the point the member raised.

Mrs L.M. Harvey: Will the department look at some of those clusters of housing in areas of high value? Obviously, if we have three blocks together and auction them off, we might get 25 per cent to 35 per cent more on valuation than selling them in isolation.

Mr T.R. BUSWELL: I will have to get advice on that, so I will come back to the member on that point. I am not sure that the department is doing the analysis to that extent, but it certainly has a high-value housing strategy.

Another thing we are doing, in part due to significant funding from the commonwealth, is putting a lot of money into upgrading accommodation blocks. I know the member talked about the one in Scarborough. Recently, I was with the member for South Perth in Como, where we opened a completely refurbished block. Just the physical refurbishment has completely changed the feeling in the immediate environment. The member for South Perth thinks the change has been quite remarkable. However, where we have identified areas in which the ratios are too high, we are trying to get those ratios down.

Mr E.S. Ripper: Will the department sell houses in Rivervale?

Mr T.R. BUSWELL: We are looking to address the issue in Rivervale. I gave a commitment to the people of Rivervale that we would look at addressing that.

Mr M.P. Whitely: What about Ashfield?

Mrs L.M. Harvey: It's my grievance!

Mr T.R. BUSWELL: The member can get up next week! I am happy to do this every week.

I have to say that in Scarborough the ratios are not as high as they are in a lot of other suburbs. However, I am aware of the issue the member has raised, and of the issue around concentration.

Mrs L.M. Harvey: In Innaloo, it is.

Mr T.R. BUSWELL: In that area, and Rivervale. I appreciate the member raising the issue, but it is an issue that the government needs to tackle through local strategies and some broader strategies, especially around behaviour management.